

Alden Sites to Apply to be National Historic Landmarks

By SUSANNA SHEEHAN

The Alden Kindred of America, Inc. has asked the town of Duxbury to be its partner as it pursues National Historical Landmark status for the Alden house site and the Alden First Site, which is owned by the town.

The Alden house on Alden St. was built by Pilgrim John Alden in the 1650s. The First Site is a cellar hole of Alden's first house built circa 1629 and located behind the middle school. It was only partially excavated in the 1960s. The First Site is under the control of the school committee.

Alden "Rink" Ringquist, director of the Alden Kindred of America, Inc., called the partnership between the Kindred and the town to pursue National Historic Landmark status "a tremendous opportunity." He said School Superintendent Dr. Eileen Williams is an enthusiastic supporter of the plan.

"Together we see great opportunities for integrating the two Alden sites into the school curriculum and for providing further hands-on educational and historic experiences for town residents," stated Ringquist in a letter to selectmen.

While the Alden house, which is open to the public, has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1978, that is a different designation than being a National Historic Landmark.

National Historic Landmark status is only bestowed to the "crown jewels" of the nation's historic and cultural heritage, said Dr. Thomas McCarthy, history professor at the US Naval Academy at Annapolis and historian for the Alden house.

Sites that become National Historic Landmarks must be historically and culturally important to all the American people, said McCarthy. There are 67,000 sites on the National Register, but there are only 2,200 National Landmarks.

"They must be one of a kind," said McCarthy in his presentation to selectmen Monday night. Some example of National Historic Landmarks include the General Motors building, the schooner Alma, the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and the Ernest Hemingway house in Key West.

The Alden Kindred feel that the house and cellar hole are significant to all Americans because of the contributions John Alden made to the Plymouth Colony. Alden spent 60 years of his life, from 1627 to 1686, as a public servant to the Plymouth Colony,

serving in various positions such as Deputy Governor, colony treasurer, and deputy from Duxbury. He was also the youngest signer of the Mayflower Compact, which put forth the idea of democratic self-rule.

Alden's life is also significant because he and his wife Priscilla Mullins became national cultural icons after 19th century poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (an Alden descendent) wrote his popular 1858 poem, "The Courtship of Myles Standish." According to McCarthy, the poem cemented the idea of Mullins and Alden as cultural icons: young European immigrants, newly married, looking to make their way in a new world.

Further, the Alden cellar hole "is an important archeological site," according to McCarthy. "It may be the earliest surviving European residence in Plymouth county," he said.

The Alden house, too, is important as it is a First Period Colonial New England home that was occupied through the 19th century.

One benefit of having the Alden house and the First Site become National Historic Landmarks is that means more access to potential grant money to conserve the properties. Another benefit is that the designation is result of a lengthy application process during which professionals in history, archeology and architecture review the research carefully and ultimately endorse the property owner's claim about its historical significance.

The application process takes about a year, said McCarthy. The National Historic Landmarks program is run by the National Park Service. Twice a year, an advisory board reviews and assists with completing applications. If an application meets the criteria, it is passed to the Secretary of Interior for approval. Finally, the National Park Service presents a bronze plaque to the site.

Selectman Andre Martecchini said of the project: "It's a great idea."

"And a great honor as well," concluded Selectmen Chairman Betsy Sullivan.